

Possessives: Yiddish vs. Norwegian

The expression of possession in the noun phrase has been widely discussed for Germanic (e.g., Delsing 1998). A notable exception is Yiddish. As the current paper will demonstrate, this language is quite significant in this respect: although there are some similarities to other Germanic languages, possessives in Yiddish turn out to reveal a number of surprising properties. To bring these features into better focus, this paper compares Yiddish with certain Mainland Scandinavian languages, in particular, Norwegian. Importantly, both languages are fairly involved in this empirical domain but in quite different ways.

While Yiddish allows possessive pronouns and full DPs in pre-nominal position, Norwegian is similar although there is some dialectal variation with regard to focus effects, etc. (see literature cited):

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|--------|--|-------|-----|---|------|
| (1) a. | <i>majn bruder</i>
my brother
'my brother' (Ja. 2005: 242) | (Yid) | a'. | <i>mitt hus</i>
my house
'my house' (D. 1998: 87) | (Nw) |
| b. | <i>der alter frojs bux</i>
the-DAT old woman's book
'the old woman's book' (Ja. 2005: 149) | | b'. | <i>jentas katt</i>
girl-DEF's cat
'the girl's cat' (Ju. 2005b: 224) | |
| c. | <i>Mojshes feder</i>
Moyshes's pen
'Moses' pen' (Ja. 2005: 184) | | c'. | <i>Pers hus</i>
Per's house
'Per's house' (D. 1993: 155) | |

Yiddish exhibits a second pre-nominal construction, which however is quite different. Whereas Yiddish only allows an indefinite article, (2a-c), certain Mainland Scandinavian dialects, if at all, only tolerate a definite determiner, (2a'-c'). Moreover, unlike the former, the latter requires the presence of an adjective. These differences also hold for full-DP possessives. Crucially, in this construction the Yiddish possessive pronoun has an inflection, cf. (2a) to (1a). Thus, this possessive will be glossed (and analyzed) differently:

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|--------|---|-----|--|--------------|
| (2) a. | <i>majner a (guter) xaver</i>
mine a good friend
'one of my good friends' (Ja. '05:184, W. '93:66) | a'. | <i>min (den) sorte kat</i>
my DEF black cat
'my black cat' (Ju. 2005a: 234) | (Da) |
| b. | <i>dem rovs an ejnikl</i>
the-DAT rabbi's a grandchild
'one of the rabbi's grandchildren' (Ja. '05:243) | b'. | <i>naboens den sribede kat</i>
neighbor-DEF's DEF striped cat
'the neighbor's tabby cat' (D. 2003: 26) | (Da) |
| c. | <i>Jicxoks a briv</i>
Isaac's a letter
'a letter of Isaac's' (L. 1995: 110) | c'. | <i>Finas te rö märrn</i>
Fina's DEF red mare-DEF
'Fina's red mare' (D. 2003: 27) | (Finland Sw) |

Finally, both languages exhibit post-nominal possessives. However, while Yiddish allows both a definite and an indefinite article, Norwegian only allows a definite determiner. This becomes especially clear with non-relational nouns, cf. (3b) to (3b'). Yiddish does not allow full DPs in post-nominal position unless they are part of a preposition phrase; certain Scandinavian dialects have more options (not shown here):

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|--------|--|-------|---|
| (3) a. | <i>der bruder majner</i>
the brother mine
'my friend' (Ja. 2005: 184) | a'. | <i>huset mitt</i>
house-DEF my
'my house' (D. 1998: 87) |
| b. | <i>a barimte dercejlung zajne</i>
a famous story his
'one of his famous stories' (L. 1995: 54) | b'. * | <i>eit forslag mitt</i>
a proposal my
'a proposal of mine' (Ju. 2005b: 162) |

To be clear, constructions involving indefinite articles (see (2a-c), (3b)) have an indefinite interpretation (Jacobs 2005), which for *majn-* is usually rendered as 'a N of mine' or 'one of my Ns' (also Birnbaum 1979: 297, Lockwood 1995: 53-4, Wiener 1893: 66). The status of possessives in existentials is not fully clear. To sum up, there are clear morpho-syntactic differences between Yiddish and Norwegian, which also correlate with differences in interpretation. I illustrate the basic proposal for the possessive pronouns.

We start with Norwegian. Many accounts (e.g. Julien 2005a) argue for movement of the possessive pronoun inside a (simple) DP. Simplifying somewhat, this is illustrated in (4a-b). I propose that movement of the possessive pronoun is also the essential ingredient for Yiddish (1a), updated as (4c):

(4) *Simple DP*:

- a. [DP *hus*_i-*et* [NP *mitt* t_i]] (Norwegian)
b. [DP *mitt*_k [NP t_k *hus*]]
c. [DP *majn*_k [NP t_k *bruder*]] (Yiddish)

(Factoring in short N-raising to an intermediate position, the low base position in (4c) derives full DPs involving preposition phrases.) Let us make the fairly standard assumption that (in-)definiteness is determined at the DP-level by Spec-head agreement (more needs to be said for (4a), see e.g. Julien 2005a). If so, and assuming that articles are in D, we can propose that the possessive pronoun in Norwegian (2a') is in Spec,DP and the article, if present, makes certain features visible (note that in some dialects, definite articles are also possible with demonstratives). In contrast, the determiner in Yiddish (2a) must be indefinite and has the corresponding interpretative effect. To avoid a feature clash, I propose that the possessive is outside the DP proper. Furthermore, unlike Norwegian (3a'-b'), Yiddish (3a-b) has no definiteness restriction. I propose that both (2a) and (3a-b) are complex DPs (cf. Jacobs 2005: 242). They differ in that (2a) involves a split DP, (5a), but (3a-b) is a case of adjunction, (5b). I assume for now that X selects an indefinite DP (see also (6a) below). To account for the inflection on the possessive pronouns, I propose that these elements take a null noun that is co-indexed with the possessum noun:

(5) *Complex DP*:

- a. Split DP: [XP [DP *majner* e_{Ni}] X [DP *a bruder*_i]] (Yiddish)
b. Adjunction: [DP *a/der* [*bruder*_i] [DP *majner* e_{Ni}]]

Non-possessives provide independent evidence that Yiddish utilizes these two types of positions more generally. Starting with split DPs, indefinite pronouns function as arguments and as such I take them to be DPs. Now, Lockwood (1995: 67) and Wiener (1893: 67) point out that some pronouns can optionally take domain-widening particles (of Slavic origin) to the left, (6a). As to adjunction, it is well-known that Yiddish allows appositives quite generally; e.g. *azá kind* 'such a child' can also appear as (6b). Crucially, the determiner-like element shows a "nominalizing" -s in the neuter. I propose that a null noun is present:

- (6) a. *abi ver*, *abi vos*, *xotsh ver* b. *a kind azás*
PRT who, PRT what, PRT who a child such.a-s
'whoever', 'whatever', 'whoever' 'a child like that one' (Ja. 2005: 187)
a' [XP [YP *abi*] X [DP *ver* e_N]] b'. [DP *a* [*kind*_i] [DP *azás* e_{Ni}]]

Finally, alternative proposals (e.g. Predicate Inversion) are briefly discussed and shown to fare less well.

To sum up, unlike Norwegian, Yiddish makes three types of positions available: possessives are in a split DP, a DP proper, or an adjunct. More generally, the paper provides more evidence that DPs are split and fits well with Grohmann & Haegeman (2003), who show that unlike Norwegian, West Flemish has 'nominal left dislocation' and 'possessor-related floating quantifiers'. If these points turn out to be more general, then we can claim that North Germanic does not allow split DPs but West Germanic does.

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